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ABSTRACT

Non-decision-making is about how things come about in the absence of conscious choice. It is defined as a decision that stops a challenge to existing values or attempts to prevent something from reaching the stage of formal or overt decision-making. The common denominator is the suppression of wider participation in the formation of public policy. This paper presents the theoretical formulation, research design, and early field results from an ongoing project that is using the theory for non-decision-making to analyze the behavior of New York City high school principals. Data about four types of non-decision-making (default, abstentions, covert, and false consensus) are considered. Very preliminary and general hypotheses are that administrative non-decision-making is inversely related to the responsiveness of the school to its clientele, that participation by the school staff and community is curvilinearly related to successful implementation of changes in the school (too little and too much impede success), and that administrative non-decision-making is negatively related to positive neighborhood attitudes toward the school in situations of impending conflict. (Author/IRT)

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PROLEGOMENON TO THE ANALYSIS OF NONDECISION MAKING

A paper prepared for the 1976 Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association

Many social scientists interested in school policy have focused on various conceptions of administrative decision making. For example, in looking at the allocation of scarce resources or the adoption of educational innovation or the desegregation of neighborhood schools, a traditional and popular approach has been to ask respondents to reconstruct (or to reconstruct for them) the events, options, values, and probabilities which have been thought to be related to the "final" selection of a particular action. Most research habitually assumes that administrative behavior, and the direction of public policy is a function of conscious choice among alternatives. That assumption is constantly reified in the phrase, "decision-making."

Unfortunately, the concept may have more to do with analytic convenience than with administrative reality. In the world of practice many decisions are not "made" in any concrete or unitary sense; rather, they emerge. Two things signal the importance of exploratory work in this area. The first is the continuing chorus of practitioner criticism about the unreality of academic explanations for administrator behavior. Part of that criticism stems

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from the violence done to the practitioner's world by the academic's hyper-rational paradigms. Second, if we are interested in why schools don't change, or why they have changed as little as they have, then it may be useful to try to understand what has not happened by looking at what people haven't done.

Nondecision making is about how things come about in the absence of conscious choice. The concept of nondecision making was originated by Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz. In their critique of the pluralist school of community power, they argued that decisions were only one "face" of power and that a second, nondecision face needed scrutiny as well. A nondecision was defined by Bachrach and Baratz as a decision* that stops a challenge to existing values or attempts to prevent something from reaching the stage of formal or overt decision making. The common denominator is the suppression of wider participation in the formation of public policy. For this research, an initial working definition of administrative nondecision making will be "a policy evolved without participation where participation may have been expected to occur."

This paper shares some work in progress on the topic of nondecision making as an explanation for administrative behavior. It poses three questions and then outlines some research which is designed to contribute to our understanding of the phenomenon. The questions are: (1) do administrators use nondecision making to pursue their interests; (2) (assuming a 'yes'

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*Note the immediate problem in having defined a nondecision as "a decision." Clearly nondecisions are a form of choice---a nondecision has consequences and outcomes---but with properties which have not so far been explicated.

response) are there normative consequences associated with nondecision making; and (3) how are nondecisions made?

(1) Do administrators use nondecision making to pursue their interests? We might first ask, do administrators use decision making? Of course they do, but the inadequacy of the decision making construct, especially in its cognitively rational guise has become a commonplace. Raymond Bauer's critique is a useful summary.

> The term decision making, when used by psychologists, decision theorists and other students of the phenomenon ordinarily implies a specific model of cognitive activity. This model assumes a single decision-making unit with a single set of utility preferences; knowledge of a reasonably full range of action alternatives and their consequences; this [sic] intention of selecting that course of action of maximum utility and, the opportunity, disposition, and capacity to make the appropriate calculations. In the process of policy formation every one of these assumptions is violated.[1]

Many observers have lamented the explanatory (or even descriptive) insufficiency of decision making conceived as rational choice among alternatives. But if choice-among-alternatives does not explain the way policies emerge or the course of organizations, then what does? After recognizing the extreme limits on cognitive rationality as a way to explain decision behavior, researchers have set off in a variety of directions. Some have stressed the impact of calculations prior to decision and the ways in which they affect subsequent action.[2] Others have stressed the potency of the problemmatic situation itself as a determinant of subsequent decisions.

This situational focus can be expressed crudely that history or destiny, or events control man.[3] These and other attempts to go beyond the shortcomings of the classical model all focus on something other than decision maker. It is as though, having found that decision makers don't proceed rationally, research can now ignore them. Yet we can't, especially if that toothless tiger, accountability is ever to have any meaning. Even though the course of organizations is not a function of administrators' conscious choices among decisions within the meaning of economic or behavioral rationality, those actions still have consequences and still deserve study.

For example, when a school principal omits to examine the allocation of resources among learning needs and produces for next year's budget more of this year's program, isn't the consequence of that omission just as surely a distribution of benefits as if the administrator had made a conscious allocation? When a superintendent declines to intervene on behalf of a community group and send the group's appeal forward to a hostile school board, isn't that action equivalent to denying the request? When a principal signals her scorn for Title IX affirmative action compliance by making derisive remarks about girls' physical education, and the climate thus created stifles the expression of additional unmet needs among the school's clientele, isn't that action sufficiently similar to a negative decision to deserve scrutiny? The point is that

organizations move not only by choice, but also by behavior which is the equivalent of choice. Practicing administrators know that such subtleties as 'deciding not to decide' steer organizations just as surely as the more dramatic events which are usually studied.

(2) Are there normative consequences associated with nondecision making? The answer to this question is 'yes' for two reasons. In the first place, to the extent that nondecisions determine what organizations do, then those determinations are going on below the level of public scrutiny and the already tiny quantum of accountability available for administrative action is reduced even more.

But there is another reason for believing that nondecisions are predisposed to the maintenance of the status quo. The preliminary definition of nondecision making offered earlier (a policy made without participation where participation may have been expected to occur) stresses the theme common to the Bachrach and Baratz definitions. But the lack of participation is not an innocent event. E.E. Schattschneider explained political change as a function of inviting losers into the decision making arena. For example, A and B contest an issue; A wins but B, the loser, is unhappy and wants to re-open the contest; to insure a more favorable outcome, B turns to the spectators and entreats them to join the fight and help determine a new outcome. But recall that B is a "loser" and thus most likely to appeal to that part of the spectator group most likely to be sympathetic to B's lost

position. If those other "losers" enter the arena and if they prevail, that will tilt policy toward a distinctly new orientation, one more congenial to a previously less advantaged group. It is in this sense that John Kenneth Galbraith has called conflict the engine of social change. But without conflict to increase participation, the forces of the status quo dominate. Thus nondecision making---which depresses participation---also depresses conflict and the absence of conflict biases the system to the status quo.

(3) How are non-decisions made? This question is at the heart of the exploratory research now being designed. Of course the root problem is the putative observability of the phenomenon. If nondecisions are nonbehaviors, then empirical research of the behavioral persuasion cannot be done. There has been a considerable amount of debate on exactly this point in the recent journal literature.[4] Undeniably, the problems of inference from data captured from a phenomenon as subtle as nondecision making will be a risky business. Yet, nondecisions are, as almost everyone will grant, a special form of decision making. It is a commonplace to observe as Winston Churchill did of Baldwin's policies in While England Slept, "Decided only to be undecided, resolved to be irresolute, adamant for drift, solid for fluidity, all-powerful to be impotent." Thus, the question is not, does the phenomenon exist, but rather what properties and processes may be hypothesized and what data collection and analytic procedures may be constructed in order to get a better understanding of this phenomenon. That is part of

the task of the research design which is outlined briefly in the next section.

Methods: The first phase of the research is concentrated on theory discovery and will use grounded theory procedures.[5]

The existing literature suggests the following major ways through which nondecisions are enacted.

Type A: default nondecision making (denial of authority, denial of autonomy, buck-passing, etc.).

Type B: abstention (selective failure to intervene, "benign neglect").

Type C: covert nondecision making (disguised or hidden choice).

Type D: false consensus (manipulation of symbolic values).

To be useful for research, categories such as the above need to (a) bracket the phenomenon with a (b) reasonably and palpably valid bearing on the phenomenon as described, and (c) be mutually exclusive. The four vehicles for nondecision making outlined above do not fare very well by those tests and stand in need of considerable revision, extension, and verification---which is of course the purpose of this exploratory research. Bachrach and Baratz, for example, emphasize the mobilization of bias as a central technique: is that adequately reflected above? The manipulation of agendas, and the linking of issues (for example,the "kiss of death strategy") seem also to be related to nondecision making but are not well represented in any typology.

This research will refine actor-situation procedures[6] for the study of administrative nondecision making. This technique as adopted for the field study of administrative behavior[7] requires the observer to describe a specific sample of decision situations according to the following categories: personnel; structure of the situation; action alternatives; outcomes; rationale; significance; pre- and post-decision atmosphere; functional area; time dimensions; pressures; costs; uncertainties; and uncontrollable factors. Situations are characterized by choosing one of a pre-determined range of descriptors, each supported by a brief narrative. Use of the technique as additionally modified for this research will allow comprehensive situational descriptors to be coded for aggregate data analysis relating possible types of nondecisions to antecedent and situational factors.

Site selection is particularly important for this research. The key task is to locate sites in which there is a concentration of policy determination from nondecision making. That condition is signalled by the presence of a "non-issue", "a matter presumably calling for a decision but which is not perceived as such or if perceived is suppressed, always because of some actor's use of power." (Frey) [8] To locate non-issues we will construct a rough index of conflict prone schools.[9] Schools which although conflict-prone have not had significant conflict (i.e., where there <u>are</u> "non-issues") will be analyzed in order to iso-

late sites where the presence of non-issues is due to administrative behavior.

Intensive and extensive data analysis will be undertaken. A large number of nondecision making incidents in the sites will be briefly described and coded. The most insight-stimulating examples from that extensive level will then be subjected to intensive analysis. The conceptual framework to be developed in the current work will include the following additional aspects. (1) Descriptive features of the acts themselves such as base; range, scope, and probability of effect; visibility; and, the consciousness with which they are commissioned. (2) Psychological correlates of actors such as "power drive, style and salience"[10]; administrative style; representational role orientations[11] etc. (3) Demographic, situational, and issue context variables and their linkages to nondecision making.

This in-depth investigation of critical nondecisions will include seeking verification of, and/or reaction to the interpreted material from panels of respondents drawn from the following groups: (a) the observed administrators themselves (retrospectively involved); (b) community, staff, and student participants; and (c) other specialists in the analysis of administrative behavior.

Preliminary Hypotheses: Although this exploratory research effort has been designed so that a data-based series of hypothesis will grow out of the field work, we can nonetheless state

some very preliminary and general hypotheses:

H.1: Administrative nondecision making is inversely related to the responsiveness of the school to its clientele.

H.2: Participation by the school staff and community is curvilinearly related to successful implementation of changes in the school (too little and too much impede success).

H.3: Administrative nondecision making is negatively related to positive neighborhood attitudes toward the school in situations of impending conflict.

Anticipated Results and Their Significance

The analysis of decisions as conscious choice among alternatives has made many important contributions but it certainly does not illuminate the entire policy process in schools. Empirical field work with the concept of nondecision making has been hampered by a lack of specifically developed methodology. This research will develop and field test several parts of that methodology. Urban school principals are "the responsible heads of the school" and can, if they choose, determine a great deal about the success or failure of practically every attempt to improve the school. This research should make a major contribution to knowledge about the subtle, quasi-intentional ways in which school policy emerges. The consequences of that advance in knowledge are two-fold. First, it should strengthen the ability of all superordinate levels to foster, enhance, and require educational change at the site administrator

level through modifications in: (a) program provisions for aid to LEA's; (b) role structures and organizations; (c) patterns of training, recruitment, advancement, and support for site administrators; and (d) provisions for program monitoring, evaluation, and reporting. Second, this more realistic analysis of decision behavior should allow urban communities and administrators themselves to understand more fully the internal decision making process of the school.

To the extent that those consequences are realized, the following outcomes may eventually be expected. (1) Increased responsiveness and accountability by urban schools to their clientele by having documented a central process of organizational direction. (2) Increased ability of superordinate units to influence site resource allocation by having disclosed a major barrier to such allocations. (3) Increased utilizations of educational R & D through the more complete understanding of a major impediment to change. (4) An enhanced ability of site administrators to recognize, cope with, and make constructive use of the conflict which is an inevitable concommitant of a single institution serving the needs of diverse populations.

The final outcome deals with decision assisting technologies. Practically all such technologies (PPBS, PERT, CPM, MBO, etc.) are founded on a model of decision-making as conscious choice among alternatives. The feeble imprint which they have had on practice ought to suggest something about the validity of that foundation. Careful explorations of the other part of the iceberg, nondecision making, may eventually result in the radical redesign and strengthening of such technologies.

Endnotes

1. Raymond A. Bauer, "The Study of Policy Formation: An Introduction," in Raymond A. Bauer and Kenneth J. Gergen, eds., The Study of Policy Formation, (N.Y., Free Press, 1968), p. ii.

2. See, for example, Herbert Simon Administrative Behavior: A Study of Decision Making Processes in Administrative Organizations. (New York, Free Press, 1965.) "Behavioral Models of Rational Choice," Quarterly Journal of Economics, Vol. LXIX, no. 1 (February 1955), pp. 99-118. (also in Nelson Polsby, et al,, eds. - Politics and Social Life. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965.) See also the concept of disjointed incrementalism in David Braybrooke and Charles E. Lindblom, A Strategy of Decision: Policy Evaluation as a Social Process, (N.Y., Free Press, 1963).

3. For a situationalist emphasis, see Richard C. Snyder "A Decision Making Approach to the Study of Political Phenomena," in Roland Young (ed.) Approaches to the Study of Politics (Evanston, Northwestern, 1958.

4. See Geoffrey Debnam, "Nondecisions and Power: The Two Faces of Bachrach and Baratz", Peter Bachrach and Morton S. Baratz "Power and Its Two faces Revisited: A Reply to Geoffrey Debnam", and Geoffrey Debnam, "Rejoinder to 'Comment' by Peter Bachrach and Morton S. Baratz" American Political Science Review v. LXIX p. 3,(Sept. 1975) pp. 889-907.

5. Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research, (Chicago, Aldine, 1967).

6. Richard C. Snyder "A Decision Making Approach to The Study of Political Phenomena."

7. Dale Mann, "Political Representation and Urban School Advisory Councils," Teachers College Record v. 75 n. 3 (February 1974)

8. Frederic Frey, "Comment," American Political Science Review LXV n. 4 (December 1971) pp. 1081-1101.

9. S. Wittes, People and Power: A Study of Crisis in Secondary Schools (Ann Arbor, CRUSK/ISR, 1970).

10. Frederic Frey, "Comment."

11. See Dale Mann, The Politics of Administrative Representation (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, D.C. Heath & Co., 1976).

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